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## WHAT MY CLASSICAL AUTHORS MEAN TO ME<sup>1</sup>

BY WILLIAM MCC. MARTIN

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It would seem an injustice to deprive young men and young women of a full understanding and appreciation of a great deal that is best in English literature. However, they are liable to have, as it were, a veil before their eyes unless they have had training in Latin and Greek. How can one understand the wanderings of Ulysses, know anything about the suitors, the bending of Ulysses' bow, or the wiles of Circe, or how can the names of Caesar, Cicero, Horace, and Virgil be much more than definitions if the only understanding that has been received is through some such treatise as *Fifty Famous Stories Retold*, probably read by the student when he was learning to read? Even such works as Hawthorne's *Tanglewood Tales* and the *Wonder Book* do not supply the need. Acquaintance must be made with these various events and characters in the original in order to understand the full significance of the allusions.

It is a pity and, in my judgment, a great mistake for colleges to give an A.B. degree without requiring preferably both Latin and Greek, but certainly a thorough course in Latin. A boy, if possible, should study these so-called dead languages in order that he may be alive. It will serve to keep his horizon from being limited by the making of money and enlarge it so that he can see that there are many other things in life and be enabled to find added joy in his leisure moments. It is to be feared that the present method of educating a boy, as it were for the day only, will so handicap that boy that should he ever be able to have leisure he cannot enjoy it. I have had men, advanced in life, who have been successes and made money, lament the fact that they had

<sup>1</sup> Extracts from an address before the Classical Club of St. Louis, at the Central High School, Saturday, April 17, 1920.

been denied an education, because they said that when it was possible for them to retire they could not do so, as the only way they could find pleasure was in their business. Their horizon was extremely limited and they realized it. I have sometimes feared that the present system of education is too much adapted to the present and does not make sufficient provision for the future. It is liable to limit a man's vision, and it is possible that the time may come when the man of advanced age who would like to retire from business will say that he cannot do so, not because he had not received an education, but because he had not received the proper kind of an education.

I am rather inclined to believe that the reason the classical languages are not receiving the consideration they should, and, in fact, are not popular, is because they are hard. It seems to be the aim of the present time to get something for nothing, and I wish very much that we had, say, some grand Greek tragedy that dealt with this motif. You can easily imagine its chorus ringing out "Woe, woe. You cannot get something for nothing, it can't be done." In the classical authors you find the big fundamental truths of life dealt with, and I have no doubt that this subject has been thoroughly expounded and perhaps incorporated in some ancient play that has never come to my attention. There is no easy road to a knowledge of Latin and Greek. It is for this reason that they are very valuable in the training of the mind. They are even better perhaps than mathematics, for they develop the qualities necessary in the study of mathematics and add to those qualities that of imagination. There are some studies of which in a very short time a student with a quick memory can get a sufficient knowledge to go into the classroom and make a fair recitation. After having made the recitation, however, the subject-matter is wiped from the mind. By cramming for examination on such a study the student will perhaps pass, but after the examination the knowledge also disappears very quickly. In fact, it is rather rash to say that that student knew anything about the subject studied. Such a thing cannot be done with Latin and Greek. A quick memory helps, but other qualities are necessary and a certain amount of industry is essential in order to prepare

each assignment. With neither Latin nor Greek is a student liable to fool himself or his teacher. I have heard of what is called, I believe, a laboratory method of teaching Latin. The purpose of such a method would seem to be to make the study easy, and, while the child is told what to do and given directions, he is left very much to himself as to accomplishing results. I may be wrong, but my idea is that the way to learn a classical language is to do the necessary work, go through the proper drilling on forms and construction, and that as a rule the average child must be told that certain things are to be learned, and then the teacher must see that he learns them. In my judgment, there is no easy way to get a proper knowledge of Latin, and the approach to its study is wrong if an effort is made to tempt the student with candy instead of telling him to take off his coat, go to work, and pay the price.

It seems to me an undoubted fact that a knowledge of Latin and Greek helps in the understanding of English and gives a most necessary training in the choice of words. My Greek has not stayed with me anything like my Latin, perhaps because I did not start it as early as I studied Latin. I may be mistaken, but I think I studied Latin before I studied English. I do know that because I studied Latin, when I began to study English I found it very easy. I already knew the difference between the nominative and accusative. The very fact that the cases had different endings helped me to understand the English, and when I came across such a clause as "If I were a Latin scholar I would have a greater appreciation of English" it was not necessary to explain the "were" instead of "was" because I remembered the old *si* with the subjunctive.

As I have said before, classical authors deal with fundamental truths in life. It is true that the gods were often introduced into a situation, but the gods in the majority of instances were the personification of natural forces. Orestes slew his mother, an unnatural thing to do, and he suffered remorse in the shape of the Furies. Greek authors deal with the broader principles of life and ideals; Latin authors are more practical. If you wish to read about an ideal republic read Plato. If you wish to read about a republic

with more practicable possibilities turn to Cicero's *De Republica*. The truth is that you do not get a thorough enjoyment of Cicero's discussion unless you have some knowledge of Plato's ideas. Cicero's *Republic* has come to us in a perhaps more fragmentary form than any of his other writings, but if the American citizen of the present day could read it and remember that its writer in his first public appearance in the oration for Roscius took a bold stand for its principles, notwithstanding the proscriptions of Sulla, and that, even though there were times when he seemed weak and vacillating throughout his life, he lost his life as a result of his philippics against Antony and his effort to keep alive the principles he sets out in his *Republic*—if the American citizen appreciated that these were principles a great man was willing to die for, when he sees them applicable to present conditions, I know he would think the advice worth heeding. For instance, it does us all good to know that the following was as true in Rome as it is today. I quote from St. Augustine's analysis of the third book of *De Republica*:

The Commonwealth is the common welfare, whenever it is swayed with justice and wisdom, whether it be subordinated to a king, an aristocracy, or a democracy. But if the king be unjust, and so become a tyrant, and the aristocracy unjust, which makes them a faction, or the democrats unjust, and so degenerate into revolutionists and destructives—then the commonwealth is not only corrupted, but in fact annihilated. For it can be no longer the common welfare when a tyrant or a faction abuses it; and the people itself is no longer the people when it becomes unjust, since it is no longer a community associated by a sense of right and utility, according to the definition.

If a man is fully to enjoy Burke, the letters of Junius, the orations of Daniel Webster, or orations of the modern day, I rather believe he should have some knowledge of Cicero's orations. From them he can get an idea of what style can do, learn something of sophistry as applied to argument, and so be in a position to analyze the effectiveness of a modern speech. I care not what occupation a man may care to follow, it is my belief that he is better trained for that occupation if he has some knowledge of the classics, gained from the originals. If he wishes to conduct an advertising agency he can get some valuable ideas from Julius Caesar, the greatest press agent of all time. He conducted his

own political campaign successfully through his *Commentaries*. A knowledge of conditions and of the men that made them in the time of Cicero gives added insight to the political discussions in the daily papers.

I cannot help feeling that one who is not acquainted with "ox-eyed Juno" and "pious Aeneas" has missed something that is really worth while, which would be of material aid in his daily life and certainly open to him greater possibilities of enjoyment.

### AMERICAN CLASSICAL LEAGUE

The Annual Meeting of the American Classical League will be held at the Hotel Sinton, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Wednesday afternoon, June 23, and Thursday morning, June 24. Headquarters at the Hotel Sinton where rooms may be secured at \$3.00 a day and upward. Meals extra. The Secretary of the Local Committee of Arrangements is Professor W. T. SEMPLE, 315 Pike Street, Cincinnati, Ohio. All friends of classical education are welcome.

ANDREW F. WEST

*President*